

Ready for Reform: An interview with Representative Michelle McGaw



“I realized that there are many elected officials, my [former] representative included, who ran on a Democratic platform, but did not really represent the Democratic values,” says Representative Michelle McGaw of her decision to run in 2020. “People have had enough of elected officials who ‘go along to get along’ and want representation that is willing to take some of those difficult stances.”

McGaw represents District 71, encompassing parts of Portsmouth, southern Tiverton and all of Little Compton. She was one of the four Democrats who abstained in the vote for Speaker of the House at the start of session last month.

The following interview has been edited for clarity and length.

Alex Kithes (Motif): You ran for the first time this year. What inspired you to run?

Michelle McGaw: My decision to run was a long time in the making. I can remember trying to locate where my representative stood on controversial issues like gun safety legislation and abortion, and not being able to locate that information. I found that concerning. As a member of the RI Democratic Women's Caucus, I spent a lot of time advocating for various issues at the State House and talking with elected officials. As I spent more time doing that I realized that there are many elected officials, my representative included, that ran on a Democratic platform, but did not really represent Democratic values.

The House Rules discussion in January 2019 was a wake-up call. When the Portsmouth Democratic Town Committee and the Little Compton Democratic Town Committee passed unanimous resolutions in support of rules reform, our representative refused to support the changes. Instead, he said he was 100% behind the speaker. It really emphasized that he was working for the speaker and not for the people of our district.

AK: You are heavily involved in your community of Portsmouth - you're a member of the Portsmouth Democratic Town Committee, the Solid Waste and Recycling Committee, and the Charter Review Committee. What do you see as the relationship between your community-level work and your work at the State House?

MM: Being an active member of my community is important to me. It allows me to get to know the people around me and to learn from them. Listening, learning and forging connections is an important part of community work and my work at the State House.

AK: You won a notable nearly 80% of the vote against an opponent who was endorsed by the outgoing incumbent. What do you believe are the reasons people came out and supported your campaign?

MM: I spend a lot of time listening to people and learning about what is most important to them. My campaign was really more of a listening tour from the very beginning. I think people appreciate someone taking the time to hear what they have to say. There are many people across our state who feel that their voices and the needs of working-class families are not reflected in the decisions made in government. Phrases like "the old boys network" and "business as usual" came up a lot. It was made very clear to me that people have had enough of elected officials who "go along to get along" and want representation that is willing to take some of those difficult stances.

AK: More broadly, this year saw a lot of progressive General Assembly wins around the state. What factors do you think were responsible for that? Do you see it as a sign of a changing political climate in Rhode Island?

MM: People are struggling. In the last two presidential elections we saw a real shift in the conversation. There is a growing awareness of our economic disparity. I think that has a lot to do with the growing divide between the “haves” and the “have-nots.” The “progressive” values that have gotten so much attention in recent elections are really about making sure that people are able to earn a living wage so that they can afford to put food on the table, a roof over their head and afford health care for their family. The past year has really highlighted just how important those basic human needs are as more of our neighbors find themselves struggling.

I am hopeful that this is a sign of a changing political climate. A big part of the progressive wins in RI that cannot be overlooked is the outpouring of support from many different organizations. That means that the people of RI took the time to get involved and donated money to help create change. They demonstrated what can happen when we all work together. The success of those actions in the last election can strengthen the resolve to push further, and I don't think that active base is going anywhere.

AK: You abstained in the vote for speaker at the start of session last month. What motivated this decision? Where do you see existing leadership has failed, and where would an alternative do better?

MM: I want to be clear that I do not see myself as “challenging leadership.” Honestly, I am there to represent my community and what I hope for is to be able to work with all of my colleagues to the best of my ability. Sometimes that means voting in opposition to what is expected of me. But it is not about challenging leadership so much as it is doing what I think is best for RI, regardless of what that may mean to me personally.

Abstaining in the vote for the speaker was really about my need to see change and transparency before providing my vote of confidence. As I met with voters across my district they spoke of a genuine distrust for the current system. During this session I will be watching for some of the changes that my colleagues have assured me I can expect from this new leadership team. With those changes will come more confidence in the process by the people of our state and I can provide my vote of confidence in the future knowing that the needs of RI are being served. I look forward to working with our new leadership team and creating solutions for some of the real challenges facing Rhode Islanders.

AK: What are you planning on working on this term in the House?

MM: As a pharmacist, I find myself drawn to issues around access to health care. High insurance premiums, rising deductibles and copays, and limits to coverage are leaving too many of us uninsured or underinsured. Even those with health insurance are delaying or skipping treatments because there are just too many barriers in place.

I am also drawn to issues around climate and the environment. I recently submitted a bill (H5279) that would require any new energy plant siting proposals to include consideration of the state's carbon emission reduction goals. This is important to all of us as we have seen a number of proposals to invest in fossil fuel infrastructure in past years. As we look for solutions to the 2019 natural gas outage on Aquidneck Island, it is particularly impactful to my community to be sure that our carbon emission goals are included in the decision-making process.